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SUBJECT: BENIN: GPRA REPORT: SPEAKER PROGRAM ON ISLAM IN THE U.S.

¶1. SUMMARY: From May 4-8, 2009 IIP Speaker Imam Moujahed Mouhammad Bakhach delivered engaging and well-received lectures on Islam in the U.S. to highly appreciative Beninese audiences. The speaker's program successfully encouraged open and honest debate on issues such as Islamic practices, non-violence in Islam, Women in Islam and interfaith dialogue. The discussion on these topics gave the positive message that Islam promotes full participation of women in civic and religious activities and non-violence. Imam Bakhach's excellent grasp of the subject and his open-mindedness further amplified the messages of dialogue, tolerance and unity that pervaded his entire program. END SUMMARY.

¶2. VENUES: On May 4, at the American Cultural Center, Imam Moujahed Mouhammad Bakhach spoke to more than 80 religious leaders, Muslim women, youth association members and journalists on the following topics: How is Islam practiced in the U.S.? What is the place and role of women in Islam? How do Muslims in the U.S. live with other religious denominations? What are the common issues and challenges Muslims face in the U.S?

The Ambassador introduced the Imam in the context of President Barack Obama's overall vision of global promotion of dialogue, citing his example and intention that American diplomats serve on the front line of outreach to various communities, including to Muslims. In that regard, she said that the U.S. Mission welcomed the opportunity to host the Imam as a means of outreach to the Muslim community of Benin and to promotion of mutual understanding generally between the United States of America and Benin. The Imam stated that his aim in visiting Benin was to correct misconceptions about treatment of Muslims in America and explain the level of religious freedom Muslims enjoy in the U.S. in order to build a bridge of understanding between Muslims in the U.S. and in Benin. He pointed out that lack of knowledge about Islam is leading to misconceptions and stereotypes and judgments about Muslims in the world. He also noted that Muslims, themselves, bore some responsibility for the negative stereotypes because they had kept to themselves and did not, generally, participate in the broader civic society activities.

Imam Bakhach noted that after the events of September 11, 2001, following his encouragement, Muslims in the Ft. Worth, Texas area began to volunteer for community service in order to improve their image. Imam Bakhach encouraged every Muslim to learn about the tenets of Islam in order to know the difference between cultural practices and Quranic teachings and then to learn about other religions in order to establish interfaith dialogue and unity.

Imam Bakhach is an active member of the Interfaith Community in Ft. Worth, Texas and the Tarrant Area Community of Churches. He advocated the need for interfaith dialogue because it leads to mutual understanding, tolerance and peace and unity in the community.

Beninese Imam Jalili Yessoufou, an IV alumnus who participated at the ACC conference, observed that there are at least 120 examples of interfaith dialogue mentioned in more than 1000 verses in the Quran. He stressed that, in fact, it is a divine command for Muslims to promote interfaith dialogue.

Focusing on the role of women in Islam, Imam Bakhach cited the example of Khadidja, the Prophet Mohammed's wife, who was a business woman, a teacher, and a warrior, to disprove misconceptions about women's role in the workforce.

According to Islamist and local guest speaker El Hadj Afis Ambekema, women, who historically had suffered from abuses such as theft, rape and violence, were liberated by Islamic teachings. He opined that today, there is no excuse for denying women their right to existence, to education and to rights of legal inheritance.

On May 5, the morning conference in the capitol city of Porto-Novo was followed by an afternoon viewing of the film entitled, "On Behalf of All Women." This USAID- sponsored film, aimed at combating sexual harassment in schools and at the workplace, was the perfect backdrop for Imam Bakhach to highlight women's role and rights as described in the Quran. He noted that women have the obligation to cover their head and the right to work, as well as to apply for divorce.

On May 6, Imam Bakhach headed for the town of Parakou, six hours outside of Cotonou, in the North of Benin, and the following day he travelled to Djougou, two and a half hours distant. At least half of the population of Parakou is Muslim, whereas 95 % of the population of Djougou is Muslim. The audience of over 350 in Parakou and Djougou were unabashed in their criticism against U.S. foreign policy in Arabic countries especially Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. Audience members asked, "Why is America ruling the world? Who makes America the police of the world?" Imam Bakhach explained the U.S. values of democracy and justice and their willingness to help establish democracy and justice in the world, especially when its allies asked for their help. Such an explanation of American values of democracy gave the positive message that change was possible and reinforced the hopeful feeling engendered in the world by President Obama's election. The audience reacted favorably to his explanation and made prayers for President Barack Obama and asked Allah to give him good health and long life so that he can continue ruling and changing the world.

In Djougou, Imam Bakhach, accompanied by the PAO the Cultural Affairs Assistant and Mohammed Adamou, an IV Alumnus, paid a courtesy call to the King and the Imam of Djougou. The week-long program on Islam ended on May 8, at the Central Mosque of Cadjehoun where Imam Bakhach was introduced to the audience by Imam Issiaka Ligali, an IV alumnus, who participated in the program on Islam in America in 2002.

13. MPP UMBRELLA THEMES AND AUDIENCE REACHED: Promoting Human Rights, Education, and Mutual Understanding. 600 participants, including religious leaders, Islamists, Women and Youth associations, journalists, NGO members, students, alumni and other interested guests attended the activities that were covered by major media outlets including TV, radio and print media. Estimated audience reached: 3.5 million. Imam Bakhach participated in an interview on Golfe TV and two interviews on local radio stations in the North.

14. IMMEDIATE RESULTS /IMPACT: The program received very positive reviews from participants in all of the events. Participants approached the Imam after the conferences, especially in the Muslim North, noting how his remarks at the conference made them change their mind about the U.S. They also suggested arranging a Sister City partnership between the city of Djougou and Fort Worth, Texas. Only one woman attended the conferences in the north, but in Cotonou and Parakou, women especially appreciated learning more about their role and rights as Muslims. In addition to further reinforcing positive Beninese impressions of America, this program served as an important and favorable outreach to engaging Muslim audiences on key issues in our programming activities.

15. NON-USG SOURCES OF IN-COUNTRY FUNDING/IN KIND SUPPORT: Post appreciated the participation of Muslim IV alumni who helped organize the events in Cotonou and in the North.

16. QUALITY OF USG SUPPORT: Excellent. Imam Moujahed Mouhammad Bakhach is an engaging speaker who delivered his remarks both in Arabic as well as English. He knows his subject well and his personal character made him a big hit with each audience. His experience as an active member of his community and the interfaith community brought vivid examples to his communications.
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